DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 188 FL 021 746

AUTHOR Martin, Ian
TITLE The Methodology of the Module: A Content-Based Approach.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 11p.; In Sarinee, Anivan, Ed. Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties. Anthology Series 24; see FL 021 739.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *English for Special Purposes; Foreign Countries; *Instructional Design; *Learning Modules; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS *Content Area Teaching

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the use of thematic modules in content-based second language instruction argues that the approach has a number of advantages over others. Thematic modules are defined as longer than lessons and shorter than a course, and it is suggested that in a content-based approach, the module constitutes the basic unit of study. Content-based modules are seen as useful for: experimenting with minimal changes in existing courses; focusing more intensively on process-methodologies; adapting instruction to communicative performance testing methods; and packaging coursework for specialized vocabulary, as in English for Special Purposes (ESP). Students appear to like content-based language learning modules, and the method allows for considerable instructional flexibility. Modules, which can be either general or context-specific, are comprised of specific elements, including: starters, motivators, or probes to establish what schema learners bring to the topic and possible directions; a minimum of two inputs; treatment(s); synthesis; output task; and evaluation. Other common elements can be incorporated, including brainstorming, language focus, learner awareness training, independent investigation, and critical analysis. ESP modules contain many of the same design characteristics as general modules, but with input and output phases reflecting the area of specialization. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

THE METHODOLOGY OF THE MODULE: A CONTENT-BASED APPROACH

AN MARTIN

ED 366 188

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

WENG

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL021746

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE METHODOLOGY OF THE MODULE: A CONTENT-BASED APPROACH

Ian Martin

It is a basic principle in this paper that the WHAT of language teaching gives us considerable insight into the HOW, whereas the reverse is not the case at all.

In other words, an approach to second-language instruction which takes content at it's starting point content is a better basis from which to address the learning needs of intermediate and high-intermediate learners than an approach from process alone.

I would also argue that the alleged theoretical dichotomies commonly advanced such as those between product-oriented and process-oriented syllabuses, between analytic and synthetic curricula, between usage and use and so forth, can be softened in the context of a content-based approach.

I propose to limit myself in scope to the making of what many refer to as "thematic modules": that is, a unit of study in a language course intermediate in scope between the lesson and the course. The module, not the individual lesson, it is suggested, constitutes the basic unit of study in a content-based approach.

In the modules I and my colleagues make up at York University, they seem to last from nine to eighteen hours which, in our non-intensive undergraduate format where classes meet three hours per week, amounts to from three to six weeks. In our intensive pre-sessional programme for international students, a module might run about a week or two.

The "content" I refer to may be drawn, as it is in many educational settings, from the various subject-matter courses "across the curriculum" at the university, and its "content face-validity" may be screened by subject specialists. Alternatively, the content of modules may not be "dependent-academic", but have independent academic value - and academic credit - in their own right (as is the case in my college). Here, topics are drawn from what ESL teachers believe will interest international students coming to Canada, and have an explicitly culture-learning focus.

In recent years, with an increased concern for the global environment, my colleagues and I have been developing modules on such topics as: War and Peace, A Global Culture?, human rights, women and development, population control, the information environment, the ozone layer and so forth. We have made modules on particular countries and cultures, regional conflicts, specific

world crises or issues.

The audience for this particular module-making activity has largely been international, heterogeneous classes of foreign undergraduate students at York, as well as speakers of French from Quebec, Canada's francophone province, who have decided to live in the English-speaking multicultural environment of Toronto while studying in a user-friendly atmosphere afforded them by a bilingual (English-French) college of York University, Glendon.

Any good content-based teaching in whatever format has the well-known advantage of involving learners in interesting, cognitively demanding first-second and third-person content - enabling them to enlarge their knowledge while broadening and deeping their linguistic skills.

The argument for the modular format combined all the content-based advantages with the flexibility of being self-contained and embeddable into existing (not content-based) programmes. An important additional practical consideration is the relatively low cost of content-teaching through modules, when compared with the various formats whereby language teachers work together with content teachers over the duration of a whole course; such adjunct courses, sheltered seminars, team-teaching arrangements and the like are quite costly.

At one (common) extreme, a course may consist of several modules arranged in sequence and those who have already adopted one form or another of content-based syllabuses in their own practice may have begun at the point at which my paper leaves off, and may not see their units or themes as separable into modules.

In Glendon's curriculum, approximately one-quarter of our courses consist either of sequenced modules or are predominantly modular. In the latter case, modules are separated from each other by a focus-on-form session or a focus-on-learner training session which may draw upon modular content but is not restricted to it.

The other courses are largely skill-based (integrated-skills or skill-focussed) or genre-based (drama, literary and non-literary text, non-print media, print media). Content is far from absent in such courses, but they are not, strictly-speaking, content-based. In our ESL courses on grammar, on language learning, and on translation and comparative stylistics (English-French), a single thematic module may be employed at some point in the course in order to practice skills in a cognitively demanding theme, against a backdrop of another syllabus format.

The notion of trialling a content-based module may appeal to programme planners who wish to experiment with minimal changes within their existing programmes without need of tackling the complexities of designing a full course with a new syllabus format. Each teaching context has its own peculiarities, and it would be a valuable professional development tool for a small team of teachers to be asked to get together to design a module which could be used across the programme.

Modules are useful in three other practical ways. In teacher-education programmes, they permit greater focus on process-methodologies than do traditional single-lesson practice-teaching tasks. In a tailor-made York/Glendon Certificate Programme in EFL Teaching with Special Reference to China, offered a few years ago, the teaching practicuum involved pairs of teachers from the PRC preparing a module designed to last over several lessons, and they were observed and evaluated at various phases of the module as it unfolded. They were able to delve more deeply into both the content and the process in this way, and came to see the communicative value of content. I have since learned that they have relabeled their upper-year courses-formerly called "intensive reading" or "extensive reading", "newspaper reading" and so forth with "content labels" (Youth in the West, World Issues, Introduction to Management and so forth), and have achieved encouraging results.

Second, modules fit in to the contemporary communicative performance testing format which slowly (but, I hope, surely,) will replace the TOEFL and MELT discrete-point tests as evidence of language competence for North American university entrance. These tests adopt, in effect, a minimal form (two-three hours or so) of the content-based module (pre-input organizers, spoken and written textual inputs as prompts, tasks in which both the learner's experience and the textual input interact to produce both spoken and written outputs, evaluation for both form and content) and, it is to be fervently hoped, will produce a significant washback effect on overseas teaching of candidates expecting to attend North American universities.

Third, and most recently part of my experience, the module may prove to be a valuable tool in the early stages of ESP course design, encapsulating as it does the smallest valid unit of the content-learning process. In a Canadian-sponsored human resource development project in Southeast Asia with which I am associated, we are in the process of investigating the learning contexts of course participants at the various SEAMEO Centres focussing on such fields as environmental science, tropical medicine, science education, agriculture, and archeology. We are considering preparing, as part of the needs analysis, "diagnostic modules" for each of these fields. In each module, appropriate content, learning tasks, learner training, overt language support, and evaluation will be built in, trialled as a sort of probe, the results of which will serve general needs analysis and anticipate materials development to come (which may or may not be modular or module-supported).

Finally, students on the whole like modules. As is the case with any good content-based programme, they claim to like the idea that they can "kill two birds with one stone". Two cases in which modules don't work, it may be due to one of two mismatches: (1) the content chosen is simply too complex, remote, context-reduced, boring, irrelevant, or culturally inappropriate for the particular learner or learners, or (2) the content is too trivial for learners who are already

experts in the field dealt with.

These problems can be handled by a sensitive teacher. The first problem arises naturally when material is in the trialling stage and - assuming that the topics chosen are motivating and culturally appropriate - they can usually be solved either by finding more appropriate input texts or by revising the methodological variables (any or all of the following: decreasing the amount or complexity of input, strengthening the linguistic or motivational aspects of the pre-input preparation by, enhancing the treatment of the input, or varying the expected outputs).

BASIC DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS

Modules may be (a) context non-specific or (b) context-specific.

In the first case, they are simply designed according to generalized pedagogical and second-language learning principles and may be targeted to general-purpose language-learners or a heterogeneous population of specific-purpose learners. Modules of the first type are typically designed by language teachers without specialist knowledge of the subject matter being treated.

In the second case, the module's design may be sensitive to the methodology, preferred learning modes and cognitive landscape of a specific discourse community. These are true ESP modules, aimed at a well-defined, relatively homogeneous learner population, and are typically designed by language teachers possessing specialist knowledge in the field in question or by language teachers in conjunction with subject specialist.

GENERAL PURPOSE MODULES

The general structure of a general purpose module is a concatenation of these elements:

STARTER + INPUT I + TREATMENT (I) + INPUT II +
TREATMENT (II) + SYNTHESIS (I+II) + OUTPUT TASK + EVALUATION

Other common elements such as **BRAINSTORMING, LANGUAGE FOCUS, LEARNER GLL AWARENESS TRAINING, INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION, CRITICAL ANALYSIS** are not positioned a priori, but rather may appear at appropriate points along the chain as determined by pedagogical considerations. Nor are **INPUTS** necessarily limited to a magic number; nevertheless, two is the bare minimum (for the **SYNTHESIS** phase to operate at least two inputs are required).

Many of these elements need no explanation: STARTERS are motivators, frame-setters, and probes designed to establish what schemata the learners bring to the topic, and where they might wish/need to go with it. STARTERS generally include such methodological devices as advance organizers (discussion or handout), which chart the course over the length of the module, specify what learning objectives might be accomplished and establishing some ground rules (time, resources available, form of evaluation etc).

BRAINSTORMING (some call this activity clustering or mind-mapping) is a cooperative exercise in which the participants (usually teacher-directed) freely generate concepts within a topic. The teacher writes down these fragments (principally of lexis) as they pour out and may contribute him/herself. Next, the teacher would attempt to order them into a visual "map" of the schematic territory. BRAINSTORMING often is part of a STARTER or it may come later and focus sub-schemata.

LANGUAGE FOCUS is a floating element in the design. It may include a focus at any grammatical or rhetorical level, and is likely to feed in to LEARNER GLL AWARENESS TRAINING (some call this "learning strategy instruction"), which also is a floating but nonetheless essential element in the concept of module presented here.

LEARNER GLL AWARENESS TRAINING is aimed at engaging the learners' interest in their own processes of learning by supplying them with some cognitive and metacognitive language with which to describe and comment upon their own learning. This is a noble tradition in Toronto, which dates back to the "Good Language Learner" (GLL) project and the various applications of this study. In fact, some of our courses actually begin with a module on "How to be a Better Language Learner", and this content is available during the remainder of the course.

TREATMENT is a cover-all, frankly teacher-centred, term for the phase immediately following the INPUT phase(s). Here, the range of methodological "moves" is extremely varied, ranging from more input-tied (processing of input) to activities which are less input-tied (reacting to input, doing something with the input).

SYNTHESIS is the phase during which two or more discrete inputs and the various "gaps" set up by them are "resolved" through TREATMENT or TASK activities. TREATMENT activities at the synthesis phase, such as comparing and contrasting the two inputs, aims at using the two inputs (if complementary) to build up a composite picture or, (if they are divergent) to take a new position.

TASK is nowadays familiar as it focuses on the phase in which the learner is transformed from being largely a "consumer" of others' information (receiving and processing the INPUT) to becoming a "producer" of his/her own information or an "applier" of the given input (and, commonly and importantly, additional data gathered through INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION) to his/her own

interests and concerns. Larger tasks, requiring considerable outside data-gathering or library research are called **PROJECTS**. According to the design aspect described here, while every module must have a **TASK** phase, the teacher may well not choose to require full-blown **PROJECTS** from each and every module.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS, described here as a floating activity, represents for my colleagues and me at Glendon a necessary deepening of input comprehension, looking as we do at the "ideology" of texts and the schemata which they exemplify - often in implicit "between-the-lines" terms. Here, we would engage the learners in a discussion of the underlying cultural, social, and political assumptions contained in a textual input. We look at fact/opinion, bias and viewpoint and implicit presuppositional information.

INPUT deserves more extensive discussion, since the modules content is based upon a careful selection of "new information" proffered to the learner and upon which the learner will work with a view to eventually producing his/her own output.

The following ten design aspects have evolved over the years at Glendon/York. They do not pretend to be startlingly innovative, nor do we always draw upon all equally in every module. They represent guidelines for module-makers and teachers are invited to select from, modify and add to the list accordingly.

1. It should be potentially comprehensible (ie at or just beyond the learner's linguistic (including schematic level). Input texts which are "authentic" for (idealized) native speakers or those "discourse community club-members" - native or non-native-speakers - who would be familiar with the concepts of the field may not be authentic for particular learners.
2. It should be potentially interesting or non-trivial to learners; ie it may deal with content which is salient in their local, regional, national environment; or, if not, it may deal with material which encourages learners to "think globally, act locally".
3. It should have content face-validity with respect to the knowledge (schemata) held by some valued discourse community (local-national or inter/supranational) with respect to the same topic. Putting this another way, it should contribute to actual or potential "club membership" into such a discourse community.
4. It should possess sequential potential, leading the learner cumulatively over the course of the module (and beyond, hopefully) into greater depth of understanding of the topic.
5. It should serve as a stimulus for and easily lead in to a variety of treatments and concatenated learning tasks (both text-focussed and permitting "jumping off from text").
6. It should have a high "magnetic" value and be capable of attracting other

"found" inputs to it (eg inputs from the media, conversational culture, etc).

7. It should be drawn from a variety of sources: inputs may be spoken/print media, may cater to popular/academic audiences, may presuppose no/lay/familiar/specialist/expert background knowledge, may be "live" or not, may be computerized or not (in which case, it may be interactive or not). In Glendon's programme, we have a particular bias for multi-modal inputs:
   film (biased) + text (balanced) + live lecture (biased against the film) ("the ozone layer")
   lecture (balanced, frame-setting) + field-trip + student oral presentations ("Canadian landscape art")
   field-trip + lab work + text-book chapter (natural science topic)
   case study + text-book chapter + lecture-discussion (management science topic)
   popular science article + film + expert lecture ("ape language")
   video + simulation game + library research + student oral presentations + field-trip ("native-white relations in Canada")
8. It should stimulate debate critical analysis of bias/viewpoint/opinion/value-orientation of the inputs. Inputs are both to be built up and deconstructed, so that learners not remain in a passive stance or be overwhelmed by the input; the process of transformation of input of intake to learner-output is paramount.
9. It should allow for the possibility of cognitive dissonance among the inputs. There are many cases of lectures providing quite opposing views to those contained in the text-book chapter. If a module establishes a partial schema through **INPUT I** and then challenges this schema's validity through **INPUT II**, it leads to more powerful learning in many cases than if all **INPUTS** point ideologically in the same direction.
   A recent module I developed on "Canadian landscape Painting" (with expert help!) led international students to learn the vocabulary of traditional realistic outdoor landscapes, and later challenged this schema by a lecture and field trip on "abstract expressionist landscapes". The dissonance and uncertainty created a lot of cognitive tension from which some very good argumentation developed.
10. It should be teacher-developed (wherever feasible, in conjunction between language teachers and subject specialists), kept as one of a module-bank of materials and activities, and continually refreshed and re-evaluated. If the theme is topical and generative, new input texts will suggest themselves and be included in the module package.

Finally, guidelines for the **EVALUATION** of content-based modules can only be touched upon here. The main point to make is that evaluation is conducted as part and parcel of the learner's output; there does not need to be a

"language quiz" at the end of each module (there have been, after all, opportunities for language focus during the module). Instead, the output is evaluated on the basis of its initial objectives, and linguistic form is focussed upon only within the larger context of the output task.

SPECIFIC PURPOSE MODULES

ESP modules, once produced, possess many of the design characteristics of the general-purpose module described above, but filtered through our knowledge of the teaching-learning processes, the inputs and outputs, of the subject-matter field in question.

Here, the ESP analyst must undertake a preliminary analysis of the communicating community contexts, both ideal and instantiated, of the discourse community whose content will provide the subject focus of the module. Essentially, this is the same sort of investigative phase as in standard ESP analysis, but with the advantage, suggested earlier, that an early product of this analysis would be a unit of content - the "probe" module - which could be trialled earlier and less disruptively than could a full-blown course.

Content face-validity must derive principally from a process-oriented subject specialist (especially one who is interested in transforming outsiders into members of the "club" represented by those who practice the subject). I am reminded of Swain's (1987) cautionary remarks to the effect that "typical content teaching is not necessarily good second language teaching". Our objective with modules is to achieve both good content teaching and good language teaching simultaneously, and this objective can only be reached when "insiders" to the content collaborate with language teachers, who are by nature trained to be process-oriented.

Design characteristics for ESP modules vary according to the field, but can broadly be analysed according to **INPUT** and **OUTPUT** phases, with certain broad characteristic typical of the kind of epistemological enquiry the learner is engaged in. Various typologies have been suggested (the disciplinary divisions of the ELTS revision project are: arts and social sciences, life and medical sciences, physical science and technology). Each type has its own communicative contexts and preferred teaching-learning styles and registers, its own degree of permitted link between the abstract and the concrete.

Our point is merely that ESP field-specific schemata can be analysed according to (a) their declarative (ideational) content, (b) their preferred interpersonal means for processing, teaching-learning and investigating content, and (c) preferred textualizations of (a) and (b) together. It is the ESP module designer's challenge to make such a sensitive investigation and to encapsulate this understanding in the form of a probe module.

METHODOLOGY: THE HOW

It will come as no surprise that I suggest that, having fully investigated the implications of the content in question, there is relatively little to be said for the existence of an independent "how" - an autonomous methodology.

Already, the module teacher has been kept quite busy, with activities focussing primarily on content presentation, processing, manipulation (treatment), synthesis, output and evaluation!

The content-based teacher will have assembled the module and sketched out its main "menu". She will have provided an initial framing, brainstorming and have stimulated interest in the topic. She will have provided ongoing content-processing support (advance organizers, built in redundancy, resonance between and among inputs, visual support, argumentation diagrams and so forth); she will have "fastened onto the content" herself, involved in the deepening conversation within the topic at hand (and discovering through her students aspects of the topic she was previously unaware of); she will have provided opportunities for evaluation and self-evaluation so that input processing and task-work is carefully monitored; she will have maintained her usual level of language support, directing learners to make better use of dictionaries, grammar handbooks, and other self-access learning aids, all within the focus of continuous GLL Learner Training.

In a content-based module such as the ones I have been discussing, methodology is subordinate to the overall objective of dealing with content. I think that a rediscovery of the extremely rich communicative potential of the **WHAT** in language teaching permits us to explore new integrated methodologies which serve that content-based objective.

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

BUZAN, T. 1974. Use Your Head. London: Ariel (BBC).

CHRISTOPHER, E. 1987. "Academia - a Cross Cultural Problem" in International Journal of Intercultural Relations, v. 11 pp. 191-206.

HUTCHINSON, T and Waters, A. 1987. English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach. Cambridge.

MOHAN, B. 1986. Language and Content. Addison-Wesley.

SNOW, M; Brinton, D and Wesche, M. 1989. Content Based Second Language Instruction. Newbury House.

SWAIN, M. 1987. "The Case for Focussed Input. Contrived but Authentic" Plenary paper. TESL Canada. Conference, Vancouver B.C.

TICKOO, M. (ed) 1988. ESP: The State of the Art. RELC Anthology Series, #21. Singapore.